

# THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Public Information Department, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340

## PRESS RELEASE

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### THE VIEW FROM AFAR: WHISTLER AND THE JAPANESE PRINT August 9 - October 16, 1988

When Japan opened its doors to Western trade in the late 1850s, the American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was studying in London and Paris, discovering some of the first Japanese art works to reach Europe. He quickly became an ardent admirer and collector of Asian art, particularly the colorful Japanese woodblock prints depicting the landscapes and everyday life of Japan. *The View from Afar: Whistler and the Japanese Print*, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from August 9 through October 16, examines the influence of Japanese prints on Whistler's art.

The exhibition presents approximately 70 works: etchings, lithographs, and drawings by Whistler, from the collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art; and woodblock prints by 18th- and 19th-century Japanese artists whose work he owned or admired--principally Hiroshige, Hokusai, Utamaro, and Kiyonaga--chosen from the collections of the Cleveland Museum and the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Photoreproductions of paintings Whistler did during the years of his greatest interest in Asian art help to illustrate his use of Asian motifs and design principles. Also included are eight blue and white Chinese porcelains from the Cleveland Museum which are representative of the type Whistler avidly collected and depicted in his paintings.

In addition to prints and porcelains, Whistler also collected Chinese and Japanese robes, fans, painted screens and scrolls, rugs, furniture, and

lacquerwork--objects which also supplied motifs for his paintings and decorative projects. His early works often depict women holding fans or dressed in kimonos, standing or reclining in the languid poses of the beauties portrayed in Japanese prints, in settings adorned with Asian decorative arts. His pastel drawing of a woman in a Japanese dress and two lithographs of women holding fans, along with photoreproductions of famous paintings of this type, illustrate his fascination with the exotic, decorative aspects of Asian art.

Early in his career, Whistler adopted the butterfly, a favorite Asian motif, for his signature. Like the seals on Japanese paintings and prints, the butterfly signature became an integral part of his compositions; its location was carefully planned to accent and balance the central image.

Whistler's study of the Japanese print (he owned over 100 albums of them) led him to experiment with the stylistic devices used by Japanese printmakers: asymmetrical composition, simplified and flattened shapes, cropped images, and the use of diagonals to lead the viewer's eye into the picture. The exhibition draws several illuminating comparisons between Whistler's prints and those of Japanese artists. For example, Whistler's 1870-71 etching of Chelsea Bridge and Church is very similar in subject, composition, and treatment of form to a woodcut exhibited next to it, Hiroshige's Haze on a Clear Day at Shiba Bay. Whistler owned an impression of the Hiroshige print and it probably inspired his own etching.

The many bridges in London were among Whistler's favorite subjects. His etchings of them were surely inspired by bridges he saw in Japanese prints, such as Hokusai's series, Curious Views of Famous Bridges in the Provinces, or the views of bridges among Hiroshige's landscapes. Like the Japanese, Whistler selected unusual vantage points to exploit the decorative aspects of the forms and silhouettes of bridges. In the large group of Japanese and

Whistlerian bridge scenes in this exhibition, viewers may imagine themselves rowing toward or under a bridge, looking down upon it, or observing it from a distance.

Whistler also shared with Japanese printmakers an interest in atmospheric effects, in how the sea and rivers appear at different times of day under different weather and lighting conditions. The prints in this exhibition by Hokusai and Hiroshige showing nature in its many moods were doubtless familiar to him, and he owned an impression of the Hiroshige woodcut depicting fireworks exploding in the night sky. In the 1870s and 1880s he produced a series of river and harbor scenes in which ships, bridges, and buildings are veiled in the misty light of dawn or dusk. In these mature works, specific influences from Japanese art are difficult to detect. A group of atmospheric etchings and lithotints in this exhibition, ranging from early morning views of the Thames to nighttime scenes of Venice, demonstrate how thoroughly Whistler had assimilated Japanese aesthetic principles and incorporated them into a completely personal form of artistic expression.

The exhibition was organized by Starr Siegele, assistant curator in the Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, and Anne Babcock, curatorial assistant. A slide tape on the exhibition, prepared by Nancy McAfee, instructor in the Museum's Department of Education, will be shown in the Audio-Visual Center while the show is on view. Mrs. McAfee will also give gallery talks at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, September 21, and Sunday, September 25.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, OH 44106; 216/421-7340.